

ALLENATION AND THE FACTORY WORKER

Latihan Ilmiah

Bagi Memenuhi Sebahagian

Daripada Syarat-syarat untuk

Ijazah Sarjana Muda Sastera

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Cheng Chuan Lim

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the alienation of factory workers from the process of work. It is based on the analysis of data collected by the writer from late April, to early June and October, 1978, from the factory workers of a Company producing toiletries and drinks in Petaling Jaya. There are about 154 workers in this factory and together with the thousands of other workers of the numerous factories in the industrial area of Petaling Jaya and Subang they form what we may today call the "blue-collar" labour force of the modern industrialized state.

The study of alienation is not a new phenomena and since its inception in the early writings of Karl Marx, this field has been thoroughly explored and exploited by sociologists, philosophers, theologians, students and the like who are all basically interested in the relation of Man to the social organisation. There have been various philosophical works like those of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Erich Fromm and numerous empirical studies such as those of Robert Blauner and Ada W. Finifter written on alienation. (For further detail, refer to Chapter on 'Alienation: Its Concept').

Alienation basically implies the disassociation of an individual from an organised or structural whole, which in this case can be an organisation

institution, political and social systems, social values, the work situation, the job, interpersonal relationships and a host of inexhaustible referents (object of alienation). The individual can also be dislocated from the general whole because of many reasons, for example, he may be alone and friendless, he may feel that he is insignificant and "out-of-place" with society at large, or that he cannot influence situations which affect him and that he is often caught in circumstances or activities which do not reflect his true needs and potential. In other words, alienation can be observed as a sense of powerlessness, normlessness, hostility, loneliness, cynicism, anomia, self-isolation or self-estrangement, discontent, meaninglessness, frustration which are basically all feelings which reflect the individual's severance from his fellow human beings and the social organisation.

Today, alienation is a phenomena that is not only characteristic of the factory workers, but it has crept into the lives of even professionals like doctors, nurses, scientists, lecturers and even writers. Moreover, it seems to be an issue that is more prevalent and is fast becoming increasingly prominent of the modern industrialised state. It is obvious that alienation is a product of a technological and mechanical age, its effects being first felt with the industrial revolution and its growth as a social problem is reflective of the



some time on each schedule as the rest of the workers and in every way possible, rapidly developing mechanisation typical of all modern states. It must be mentioned though, that different forms of work organisation and varying methods of mechanisation in the capitalist mode of production can however result in varied conditions of alienation.

In studying alienation, one can then perhaps hope to have a better understanding of this social problem and consequently the social system which has brought it to its forefront.

### Methodology

The data was collected during the month of October. However, prior to that, the author worked and participated in the factory production for about three weeks in the months of late May and early June. She was treated as one of the employees, she worked, ate, socialised and integrated with them and she was also paid accordingly for the work. She was expected to keep to the



same time on work schedule as the rest of the workers and in every way possible, she was subjected to the same treatment as the other workers.

A total of 40 workers were then asked to answer to a scheduled questionnaire, which was prepared in the workshop. The sample group from past projects had the feeling that the questionnaire was only a formality. During the work experience, informal chats and conversations with the workers served as "feeler" for the formation of the questionnaire. Often the feelings of the worker towards their work were discussed and incidents, the nature of work and all aspects of the conveyor belt mode of production was observed.

The identification of workers can never be determined with any and the list of names of each member was not available, it was not possible to work with an organized sample group.

The author approached the workers during work hours as that was the only time that one could find them. A relief worker had to replace the worker while he took time away from the conveyor belt. The interviews were carried out in the corners, away from other workers and also from the surveillance of the

A total of 40 workers were then asked to answer to a scheduled questionnaire, which is reproduced in the Appendix. The sample group were just picked from the factory labour force. Twenty Malay and twenty Chinese were chosen and all those interested were from the permanent work group as the temporary girls have had too little work experience to be suitable respondents. As the attendance of workers can never be determined each day and the list of names of each member was not available, it was not possible to work with an organised sample group.

The author approached the workers during work hours as that was the only time that one could find them. A relief worker had to replace the worker while he took time away from the conveyor belt. The interviews were carried out in the canteen, away from other workers and also from the surveillance of the

#### Research Problems

The nature of the conveyor-belt technology made it difficult for the workers to be interviewed. The pace of work does not allow a worker to leave the line without a relief and often even when a relief was found, workers were reluctant to leave their work station for fear of being reprimanded by their supervisors.



supervisors so that the workers would feel more at ease to talk. The questionnaire was presented in English and it had often to be translated for the workers who did not speak the language.

Apart from data gathered from interview schedules, informal interviews were also carried out with strategic people from this Company. These personnel form the decision making or supervisory body. In short, these people are the ones responsible for all decisions concerning work. They are the ones who decide on the amount to be produced and the quantity of production, they formulate salary benefits, pay schemes and the general employment conditions of the workers and they organise and decide on the work schedule and organisation of the employees.

All information regarding the organisation of the factory, employment policies, the wage scheme, the economic standing of the Company and the hierarchical structure of the organisation was obtained from these informal interviews.

#### Research Problems

The nature of the conveyor-belt technology made it difficult for the workers to be interviewed. The pace of work does not allow a worker to leave the line without a relief and often even when a relief was found, workers were reluctant to leave their work station for fear of being reprimanded by their supervisors.



Besides, many of the workers were shy and most of them were apprehensive about being questioned. Most of them felt that they will not be able to answer the questions and they basically preferred not to discuss their work for fear that their opinions will be quoted to the authorities. The low estimate of their intelligence and a belief in their ability to converse or give information is perhaps one of the earliest indication of alienation.

The biggest problem that the author faced was that it was felt that many of the workers did not respond honestly to some of the questions, especially to those pertaining to their likes and dislikes of their job. They were suspicious that the author might have been employed by the administration to infiltrate into the work-force and hence "spy" and eventually report on them. Reassurance from the author did to some extent allay their fears but others were still too cynical and in such cases, answers which the workers felt were safe were given rather than their true opinions. Quite often, a worker would choose an answer that is felt to be what the author is expecting, rather than express what they really felt.

In translating the questions into Chinese and Malay, much of the essential meaning of some of the questions were lost, and because of this, the author is afraid that the responses may not be in line with the questions asked. Frequently, when questions concerned job satisfaction and the areas of mental stimulation and intrinsically rewarding work,

it was felt that such issues were not probably understood. Hence, the author would like to stress that many of the answers may not be on the reflection of what the workers actually feel.

### Scope of Study

Chapter two provides a brief analysis on the meaning and concept of alienation. The different approaches and views taken by past writers and researches were presented.

The third chapter is an examination of the factory and work organisation within the Company. The techniques of production, work schedules and the factors governing quality and quantity of production were also studied. Work employment, wages, fringe benefits, conditions of employment and security for the worker was also included in this chapter.

The fourth chapter was a thorough analysis of the aspect of alienation, namely, that of powerlessness, meaninglessness and self-estrangement.

The last chapter is a summary and conclusion of the study. The concept of alienation among the factory workers were reviewed and other factors such as education, cultural and personal differences, socialisation and present employment situations were looked into.



## CHAPTER 2

### ALIENATION : ITS CONCEPT

The purpose of this section is to clarify what is meant by the concept of alienation or at least to try and clarify the aspects of alienation that have been touched upon in the study. So many meanings and interpretations have been attributed to the concept of alienation since its inception in the writings of Marx, that social scientists today can hardly agree on any single meaning of this concept. As Blawner says, "One basis of confusion is the fact that the idea of alienation has incorporated philosophical, psychological, sociological and political orientations ... one finds statements of the desired state of human experience, assertions about the actual quality of personal experiences, propositions which link attitude and experience to social situations and social structure and programmes for the amelioration of the human condition".<sup>\*1</sup>

According to Finifter: " So many meanings have been attributed to their concept, many of them vague and mystical, that it verges on losing much of its scientific utility. Even in empirical research alone, the term "alienation" has been used to refer to powerlessness, estrangement, anomie, hostility, discontent, isolation, meaninglessness, frustration and a host of other cognate and occasionally peripheral concepts".<sup>\*2</sup>

Other social scientists like Steven Lukes (Alienation and Anomie  
Emile Durkheim Anomy, Kenneth Kemrison (the varieties of Alienation) and

\*1 R. Blawner, Alienation and Freedom, Page 15

\*2 Ada W. Finifter, Alienation and the Social System, Page 3



Melvin Seeman (on the meaning of Alienation), have all come up with other explanations and attempts at defining this multi-faceted concept of alienation.

Since the concept of alienation is believed to have been inspired by the early writings of Marx, it would perhaps be of interest that we try to understand what Marx tried to impart in his early writings and hopefully in the process, we will be able to understand the development of this concept over the ages.

In the economic and philosophical manuscripts, Marx distinguishes four aspects of alienation. Although he discusses alienation from the objects produced first, he sees this aspect of alienation as a result of the fact that man is alienated from the work process itself. "How could the worker stand in an alien relationship to the product of his activity if he did not alienate himself in the act of production itself. The product is indeed only the resume of activity, of production". Since for Marx, man is alienated from his daily work activities, he also becomes alienated from himself, from his own creative potential and the social bond that defines him as human (his "species being") Finally, as a result of being alienated from his own humanity, he also becomes alienated from his fellow workers and from other men in general.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Marx saw the alienation of the worker as a condition in which the worker can find no self-fulfilment in the work process, which eventually leads to his detachment from the product of work. But when life activity or



productive activity, that which separates man (species being) from animals, "becomes only as a means for the satisfaction of a need, the need to maintain his physical existence",<sup>4</sup> then the worker becomes separate from the man (species being) that he is supposed to be. He is thus alienated from himself. Because he is alienated from himself, he is likewise alienated from other men because "everyman regards other men according to the standards and relationships which he finds himself placed as a worker".<sup>5</sup>

Marx's writing is effectively summed up by Steven Lukes, "Marx pointed to the meaninglessness of work and a sense of powerlessness to affect the conditions of one's life, dissociation from the products of one's labour, the sense of playing a role in an impersonal system which one does not understand or control, the seeing of oneself and others within socially imposed and artificial categories, the denial of human possibilities for a fully creative, spontaneous, egalitarian and reciprocal communal life".<sup>6</sup>

Although there have been many criticisms that Marx's study is isolated in the early capitalist society of his time and hence may not be applicable in modern society, in which differences among types of industry or factory<sup>organisation</sup> may consequently affect varying degrees of alienation, the quality and validity of this early work and its subsequent impact on contemporary thought cannot be denied. Although modern industries may have changed over the years, the original

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Page 15

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Page 16

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Page 28



objection that Marx had regarding the workers' relationship to the process of work still stands. No form of collective bargaining, security provisions, salary benefits, workers' protection or any pecuniary arrangements can compensate for the fact that man is dehumanized in the work process itself by the nature of the work task. Marx objects to the fact that work organisation in the capitalist system deprives the worker of the context in which to develop his human potential for creativity through labour. The worker is seen as performing rote tasks which provide little or no opportunity to engage his creative and intellectual powers - only his manual abilities are organised in tasks envisioned and designed by others.

In the light of what has been discussed above, this study will look at 4 specific aspects of alienation that will be dealt with in the course of this study. These are powerlessness, meaninglessness, self-estrangement and social alienation.

### 1. POWERLESSNESS

Powerlessness has been defined as a feeling that the things that importantly affects one's activities and work are outside his control.<sup>7</sup> Blauner sees powerlessness as when "... he (a person) is an object controlled and manipulated by other persons or by an impersonal system (such as technology), and when he cannot assert himself as a subject to change or modify this domination. Like an object, the powerless person reacts rather than acts. He is



directed rather than self-directing.\*<sup>8</sup>

Powerlessness in this study has been looked at basically from two aspects. One is from the structural level in which powerlessness is necessarily bound to the hierarchical organisation of responsibility and authority. The differential allocation to some members of authority over the affairs of others and the lack of authority or say that one has in the activities of an organisation can be responsible for varying degrees of powerlessness within each individual of the organisation.

One condition that arouses intense alienation in the aspect of powerlessness is the control of subordinates to act back on their superordinates. The positional relationships of the subordinates and their superordinates being studied, the positional disparity between that of the worker and "boss" hence designates the degree of powerlessness felt by the subordinate. The degree of interaction between the authority and his subject is also reflective of the degree of powerlessness felt by the subject. If a subject feels that he has a certain amount of interaction with his authority, this would mean that there is a certain amount of reciprocal influence. The fact that a subject can exercise some control in the form of suggestions or communication over the actions of his superior and hence indirectly, his own affairs, will indicate the degree of powerlessness, felt by a person.\*<sup>9</sup>

\*<sup>8</sup> Op cit, Blauner, Page 16

\*<sup>9</sup> Op cit, Finifter, Page 140



The second aspect has been studied from the aspect of control and freedom within the work organisation. Blanner has pointed out 4 modes of industrial powerlessness. These are:-

- (a) the separation from the ownership of the means of production and the finished product;
- (b) the inability to influence general managerial policies;
- (c) the lack of control over the conditions of employment;
- (d) the lack of control over the immediate work process. <sup>\*10</sup>

The separation of the worker from the modes of production and the finished product would not be of much concern to the workers of today. The nature of employment in a large-scale organisation means that workers have forfeited their claims on the finished product and that they do not own the factory, machines or often even their own tools. In line to Max Weber's expansion of Marx's concept, of the separation of the industrial worker from the means of production, to all modern large-scale organisations, he states, "Civil servants are separated from the means of administration, soldiers from the means of violence and scientists from the means of inquiry".

Likewise, the lack of control over decision making is today accepted as part of the nature of large-scale organisations. The hierarchical authority structures leave all the decision making to the powers at the top and the

\*10 Op cit, Blanner, Page 16/17



average worker would not want to take the responsibility of deciding what to produce, how much, for whom, who to employ or what to sell anymore than he wants to take the products that he makes home, makes these decisions affect his immediate work-load.

The workers today also have a certain amount of control over the third factory. Their participation and membership in the union gives them some control over the conditions of employment, and labour laws can see to the protection of the worker. However, control through union is but only marginal.

Thus, this study emphasises on the last aspect of control over the immediate work process. It is the powerlessness of the worker in face of the dominating technological system that conditions the degree of alienation.

"When a worker is dominated and controlled by the machine system in the process of his work, he, in effect becomes reduced to a mechanised device. Reacting to the rhythm of technology rather than acting in some independent or autonomous manner, he approaches most completely the conditions of thingness, the essence of alienation."<sup>11</sup>

The ability to control the pace of work is hence the most important factor to the degree of powerlessness he feels within the work organisation. When he is at the mercy of the conveyor belt, he must work according to its pace. When he is unable to control the pace of work, it restricts his freedom



of physical movement. He is tied to the machine whether he feels comfortable or not, and he has to stay by the machine even though he may be caught in a claustrophobic situation. The inability to control the pace of work also results in the lack of control over the pressure of work. The quality of production is dictated by the machine and hence his quality of work is also determined by the machine. There is no sense of fulfilment and a feeling of overpowering helplessness and powerlessness in face of the machines.

## 2. MEANINGLESSNESS

Melvin Seeman sees alienation in the meaninglessness usage as "the individual's sense in understanding the events in which he is engaged". Karl Mannheim alludes meaninglessness to the increase of "functional rationality" and the constant decline of "substantial rationality". Mannheim argues that as society increasingly organises its members with reference to the most efficient realisation of ends, there is a parallel decline in the "capacity to act intelligently in a given situation on the basis of one's own insight into the inter-relations of events".<sup>12</sup>

Today, in the efficient organisation of work and functions, everything is geared towards the highest efficiency. The means of production, the cost, the technique of production, the flow of demand and supply, the sale of goods and a paraphernalia of other technical and social organisations is only understood and executed by a specialised few. There is what is called an increase



in "functional rationality" on the other hand, along with the greater efficiency and rationality on the whole, the substantial rationality of the individual who makes up the system declines. The man who is working on the conveyor belt needs to know only very limited tasks, he is not required to understand or even know anyone else's job or even how his contribution fits into the entire organisation. There is hence, a decrease of "substantial rationality".

The manual worker in the line today finds it hard to understand what meaning his work can contribute to the organisation as a whole. He cannot find meaning in his relationship to the product created, to the process of work nor to the organisation of work. A worker cannot find a sense of purpose in contributing towards a standardized product which involves repetitive work cycles, nor performing a task on only a small part of the total product. The nature of modern manufacturing with its highly specialised tasks and standardized production thus reduce the workers' contribution to the product as a whole and increases his sense of meaninglessness in the process of work.

### 3. SELF-ESTRANGEMENT

Self-estrangement in line with Marx's theory of self-alienation refers to the fact that the worker may become alienated from his inner self in the activity of work. It is generally characterized as the loss of intrinsic meaning or pride of work. (Wright Mills affirms this when he says, "In the normal course of her work, because her personality becomes the instrument of an alien purpose the salesgirl (or worker) becomes self-alienated".<sup>\*13</sup>



The worker is hence alienated from himself when in the process of work, he becomes nothing more than a cog in the machinery. Self-estranged work can be further reflected in boredom and monotony, the absence of personal growth, and a threat to a self-approved identity.<sup>\*14</sup> The lack of control over the work process, an experience of depersonalized detachment rather than immediate engrossment or involvement in the job tasks and a lack of present time involvement in which the means of work becomes mainly instrumental to future fulfillments rather than present satisfaction, are all conditions of self-alienating work.

Since self-estranged work is a means to an end rather than an end in itself, satisfaction hence lies in the future rather than <sup>the</sup> present and there is hence a feeling of detachment in the work process. This is reflected in the heightened awareness of time, that time passes slowly. Blauner says, "Lack of involvement results in a heightened time-consciousness, If it were possible to measure "clock-watching", this would be one of the best indicators of the mode of alienation".<sup>\*15</sup>

When work is not inherently involving, it will be felt as monotonous. Extensive industrial research on monotony has revealed that a high degree of self-estranged work is found in factory employed. The work on the conveyor belt is repetitive, simple, meaningless, and boring and it demands a minimal amount of intelligence for anyone to do such work. Hence, apart from being monotonous,

<sup>\*14</sup> Op cit, Blauner, Page 27

<sup>\*15</sup> Ibid, Page 28



factory work or self-estranged work also threatens a positive sense of self-hood in a person, because it fastens a damaging rather than an affirmative occupational identity. "Self-estranging work compounds and intensifies this problem of a negative occupational identity. When work provides opportunities for control, creativity and challenge - when in a work, it is self-experience and enhances an individual's unique potentialities - then it continues to the worker's sense of self-respect and dignity and at least partially overcomes the stigma of low status. Alienated work without control, freedom or responsibility on the other hand simply confirms and deepens the feeling that societal estimates of low status and little worth are valid."<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Seeman can aptly round up Blauener's statement, "To be self-alienated in the final analysis, means to be something less than one might ideally be of the circumstances in society were otherwise".<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. SOCIAL ALIENATION

Social alienation or social isolation has been seen to result from a fragmentation of the individual and social components of behaviour and motivation. It is a feeling of being in but not of, society, a sense of remoteness from the larger social order, an absence of loyalties to immediate collectivities.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, Page 31

<sup>17</sup> Op cit, Finifter, Page 53

<sup>18</sup> Op cit, Blauener, Page 32



In the sense developed by Emile Durkheim, "it is the lack of social integration of an individual in a state of anomie that leads to the isolation of an individual and his separation from society".<sup>\*19</sup> Individual workers are hence unable to feel a sense of loyalty or a feeling of integration to the occupation or company.

Anomie or the break-up of integrated communities can best describe the modern society of today. The massive social processes of industrialization and urbanisation had destroyed the normative structure of a more traditional society and uprooted <sup>people</sup> from the local group and institutions which had provided stability and integration. But the new industrialized society does not provide any social structure or normative integration that could help the workers in developing a new sense of loyalty to industrial enterprise or commitment to the new social role of factory employee.

The factory workers are a social group in themselves, isolated from the general social structure as a whole and yet within the industrial society, they are not integrated. The rise of large factories tend to increase the social distance between worker and management, and worker from worker rather than integrate them.

<sup>\*19</sup> Opit, Finifter, Page 4



The factory worker is thus not only isolated within society as a whole but he also lacks individuality within the mass society of industrialized worker. Hence, a feeling of normlessness or "anomie" as used by Durkheim is created. One can perhaps sum up this state of alienation as when "needs for social integration and clear social goals are not achievable under conditions of normative uncertainty".<sup>\*20</sup>

##### 5. CONCLUSION

The above is hence an attempt at the definition of some of the varied meanings of the concept of alienation that has been touched upon in this study. One has to bear in mind however that even though the concept of alienation has been approached from four specific dimensions, one cannot clearly assert that any single individual is alienated in any one sense - whether that of powerlessness, meaninglessness, self-isolation or normlessness. In the process of industrial workers and especially that of the conveyor belt, an individual may be affected by any one or even all of the above conditions at a particular time and within a certain circumstance. One condition may act as a catalyst for the other although one may be manifested and the other not. One cannot confirm that an individual feels powerless and yet a totally integrated person into the industrial system. In other words, even though an individual may or may not be affected by any of the above conditions, one cannot say for certain that the individual is hence not alienated. It is still possible that an individual may be alienated from the work but in another sense apart from the conditions stated above.

<sup>\*20</sup> Ibid, Page 9

It is also important that one should always look at this study under the condition in which the workers have been observed and that one should be aware of the fact that alienation can vary with time, individual differences and personalities, place, cultural back-ground, educational differences and other circumstances. Hence, the referent of study or object of study should be clear. An individual can be alienated from many things, for example, political systems, interpersonal relationships, job or work place, social institutions and organisations. In this study, I have isolated the referent of study to the work process and relating to this, the working places, conditions for work and relationships of the individuals within the work system.

One should also be clear of the aspect of alienation that is being studied and in this case, the four dimensions of alienation selected above have been discussed. However, even if an individual may not be affected by any of the above conditions, it may be possible that he may not be totally free of alienation, as the variety of dimension of this concept cannot be totally exhausted.



## CHAPTER 3

### WORK ORGANISATION AND EMPLOYMENT

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE FACTORY

Factory X is considered as light industry and the products manufactured include toiletries and drinks. Some of the items produced are hair-cream, body talc, shampoo, body cream and hand lotion, refreshing (health) and breakfast drinks. It is supreme in two of its leading products namely hair cream and health drinks and it has held the market for the past years.

There are several other companies in Malaysia that deal with the same kinds of products, but each has a reserve market for its particular brand. Factory X stands amongst the top ten of light manufacturing industries in Malaysia. Unfortunately, asset figures could not be disclosed although the author had made an enquiry.

Factory X has characteristics of a modern industry. Its economic and social structure is bureaucratic and relations between workers and management have been formalized accordingly to set authority structures. It is relatively heavily mechanized and the production plants are very large with quite elaborate hierarchies of authority. The assembly line method of production continues and intensifies the trend towards greater division of labour, rationalization and efficiency.

The Company produces according to the demands for its products and also



in line with the budget set for it. It has to maintain a certain level of production and hence meet up to the required estimate that has been dictated by the head company. This company is one branch out of the several in the Far East including Hong Kong, Thailand, Philippines and India. Many of its products are also sent for export via the branches overseas.

The company produces in line with a constant demand for its products with slight fluctuations that are normal of the interplay of supply and demand forces. Further expansion of the factory will depend on the prospects of further investment which will be decided by the foreign owners. Factory X is a private company with its head company in England, but is registered in both England and Malaysia. No further investments will be made or willingly made unless management can be secure of increasing returns or profits.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE WORKFORCE

Because of the stability of the company, workers also feel relatively secure in the factory. When asked as to whether workers feel that they can have their jobs for as long as they want, 72-5% replied positive. 52-5% of the workers also felt that they will not be laid off in the next 6 months. The chances of retrenchment are hence minimal.

However, the girls who are in the permanent work force are much better off than the temporary workers. The study has selected only the permanent workers for its purpose because they are more experienced and have had a much



longer time on the line, and hence are more proficient in providing the necessary information concerning their feelings towards their work. This company also maintains a temporary work force and this group serves as a "buffer" for business fluctuations and consequently, fluctuations in production levels. The availability of this "buffer" work force enables the company to avoid retrenchment of long term or permanent workers, hence increasing the security of these workers. The temporary girls are not kept for longer than six months at a period. They are hence employed and dismissed according to the needs for production. Perhaps one can say that the temporary workers are probably the worst off on the employment list, the factory productions and the permanent work-force benefiting at their expense.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK-FORCE

All the assembly-line workers in the work force are female workers. There are 194 workers in the factory. The average age for all the workers is 26, the oldest member being 45 years and the youngest is 21 years of age. Their term of service in this present factory ranges from 4 months, 6 months, 1 year to 20 years for some of the older workers. Many of the older workers can be considered the "pioneers" of the assembly-line production which started at least 20 years ago in this company.

Out of the sample group selected, 42-5% had some years of primary



education, 35% entered secondary school and only 22-5% completed their secondary level education with a MCE (or 'O' levels). Most of them had to stop school because they were poor, some were uninterested in school at their age while others dropped out of school after their lower certificate of examinations, when they could not qualify to continue their education in the government school and were too poor to go to private schools.

Most of these workers are unskilled, in fact 100% interviewed were all non-skilled assembly-line workers. Many of them had worked in other factories before, such as electronics, matches, plastic, textile, metal and chemical industries. Most of them expressed that the work situation and employment conditions are relatively better in the present factory, although it may not be what the workers ideally desire. Other girls have had a wide variety of past occupations such as tailoring, house-help, rubber tapping, receptionists, petrol attendants but none of these experiences nor those gained from working in other factories are applicable in their present job.

Some of the conditions that the workers preferred in this present company are the pay, the cleanliness and systematic organisation of work in this factory, the lunch and tea breaks, easier work load and the relatively informal atmosphere of the working situation compared to the rigidity of other factories like electronics or the harsh working conditions of metal and plastic factories.



Most of the girls in the factory are from other states. Only 42-5% of the workers are from Selangor or in the area of Kuala Lumpur and its vicinity. 57-8% of the work force have migrated from the other states to seek employment in Kuala Lumpur. Most of these girls stay on their own, with family friends or rent rooms in houses.

### DESCRIPTION OF WORK ORGANISATION IN THE ASSEMBLY-LINE

The light manufacturing industry has basically 2 major branches, which differ considerably in their characteristic technologies. The manufacturing division includes the manufacture of raw materials into the products which will be packed. The assembly line involves the process of completing the final product including the filling, labelling, capping and packing. The maintenance of the machines also comes under the manufacturing branch of this industry. Other necessary components like caps, covers, bottles, containers, labels, and boxes are all bought and not manufactured in this factory.

Most lines have the machines for the processing of raw materials, filters for filling, the capping and labelling machines and the central conveyor belt which transfers all products through the different stations of assembly.

Standardization is a very important part of the assembly line technology. The size and shape of each bottle, the size of caps and covers and how each can be packed economically and with minimal wastage is the essential aspect of assembly line production. Each individual part and component which makes up the final



product has to be constant in order to ensure the standardization of the final product.

The assembly of these components take place along a conveyor belt which regularly and rapidly brings the products past the worker's station. The different operations necessary for the completion of the final product are organised into an uninterrupted time series, and the job of each worker is almost as sub-divided as the parts which they assemble. The highly rationalized conveyor belt form of production is the most distinctive aspect of this light manufacturing industry and because the line sets the standards and determines the rhythm of production in the industry, most jobs that are off the line like the manufacture of drinks and hair-cream do take on many characteristics of the assembly line work, although not in such extreme forms.

The basic procedures necessary for the completion of each product include the manufacturing, filling, capping, labelling, packing and stocking. Most of the machines for the manufacture of the raw materials are placed above the conveyor belt and pipes lead the drink or cream direct to the filling nozzles. Empty containers and bottles which have been arranged by workers are then carried by the conveyor belt towards the filling nozzles. The filled containers are then moved to a capping machine where the caps are punched and sealed automatically. If the products need to be capped manually, the products are then carried



along to another station, where two girls are often seated with boxes of caps and covers beside them. The caps are then screwed on manually. Labelling is also done automatically, although a worker may be required to sit and watch each bottle to ensure that they are properly capped as the machines can occasionally jam-up. The products are then packed into individual boxes if necessary and then packed and stocked into the required numbers. Fork-lifters will then transport the finished products to the storage rooms, which will in turn be transported to the markets.

The speed of the conveyor belt is hence determined by the speed of the filling nozzles. Some lines can produce as many as 75 units per minute, which is the fastest in this factory. The slowest line produces 5 units per minute. However, the conveyor belt is often run according to the abilities and speed of the workers. The fastest line has been set to 60 units per minute. Hence, the workers have to handle a capacity of 5-60 units per minute, depending on the lines which they are working on. If there are two workers tending to a particular operation, then each worker will have to handle at least 30 units per minute on the maximum. Therefore, a worker is given a second for each operation and two seconds if the work load is shared. However, the speed of work is often dependent on the skill and speed of the worker. If a line is too fast, then more workers will have to be put, <sup>in</sup> one particular station but too many workers at a single spot may also prove to be cumbersome, rather than helpful in the eventual organisation of work. (The effect of the pace of the assembly line is discussed in the Chapter on "Powerlessness".)



Apart from human considerations, the speed of the line is also determined by the capacity of the machine which manufactures the raw products. Sometimes, the machine may not be able to produce as fast as the bottles can be filled, or the heating machine may not be able to heat the quantity required within the time demanded. Hence, because each line is made up of and dependent on so many different machines, one would have to compromise the capacity of one machine with another.

In such assembly line production, work operations are broken into their simplest component. The extremely precise and synchronized work flow and production schedule guarantee a high degree of co-ordination, so that each worker performs his operation in the right sequence. Because of this extreme sub-division of work process, most jobs in the factory do not call for skills of any kind. A job on the assembly line takes only a few hours to learn if it is simple, or a few days if it is a little more complicating. Of the number interviewed, all were unskilled where this particular form of production was concerned, while others had such skills as tailoring, typing or experience gained from other factory jobs which are inapplicable in their present employment.

Mass production techniques have greatly reduced the variety of work, and repetition is characteristic of the large majority of unskilled jobs. Jobs in this factory are so highly fractionalized that most of the jobs consist of only one operation and at the most two. If one is tending the drink line,



then one can either stack bottles into a washing machine, watch the capping machine or filling nozzles or pack. The packing requires 2 minor operations, sealing the box and stamping one's serial number onto it. The stacking is done by yet another worker. There is hence little variety in the work of the assembly worker because the majority of jobs involve a few operations.

#### THE AUTHORITY STRUCTURE OF THE COMPANY

Factory X comes under the supervision of the Regional Managing Director, who is responsible for all the branches of this company in the Far East. The Regional Financial Director, Regional Technical Director, General Manager, Personnel Manager and Research and Development Managers are all responsible to the Managing Director.

Since the Personnel Manager is directly responsible for the employment of workers, an overview of his job could perhaps give an indication as to the extent of the influence that he has concerning the employment of workers.

In employment, he is responsible for the screening, interviewing, testing, selection and employment and induction of new employees. He maintains employee records, personnel statistics and grading of employees. He is also responsible for employee interviews and counselling, decides on the hour of

work and overtime and advises in the Company's Personnel Employment Policy.

He also sees to the formulation and enforcement of wage policies, and has control of wages and deductions thereof. He authorizes changes in individual rates and assess and control differential rates and special payments. He also has a host of other responsibilities, like maintaining industrial relations and in this, he acts as a negotiating officer with trade unions, ventilates and deals with grievances and he sees to the overall welfare, health and safety of his employees.

Thus, it can be seen then that the Personnel Manager plays a major role in the working life of the factory worker. Their hours of work, scheme of payments, holiday and annual leave are largely decided on at least initiated by the Personnel Manager. Yet, the man who has the most influence in the working situation of the factory worker is the man who is furthest away from the workers at large. His presence is only felt whenever he is seen occasionally walking around the site but never otherwise.

The factory Manager is the man who is a more important concern for this study because he is the most senior in authority who works within the factory site. His office is situated within the factory and he is often seen tending to the machines, checking on the chemical constancy of the products



and giving orders or instructions to the workers sometimes. He is responsible to the General Manager and he shares the same status as the General Sales Manager, the Regional Marketing Manager and the Distribution Manager. (Refer to TABLE 1).

The Factory Manager with the assistance of the Factory Planning Manager, the Maintenance Superintendent and the Production Chemist, see to the overall running and management of the factory itself. He also sees to the day-to-day functioning of the factory. He is responsible for the care and security of the site. He maintains factory safety, keeping a close liason with the fire-work department. He is also responsible for the harmonious labour relations within the factory.

The Factory Planning Manager and the Production Superintendent assist the General functioning of the factory. Both these personnel also work within the factory premise and they are often seen at the production lines, talking to the charge-hand and often, directing or supervising the work on the line whenever necessary.

Under the Factory Planning Manager, he has a Production Programmer who plans the schedule for production. He is also responsible for the storage and eventual despatch of the goods and to assist him in this are the two store-keepers, 2 store-clerks, 3 labourers and 1 fork-lift driver. The store-



keepers see to the receiving and issuing of products, the security of the stores and the safe-keeping of the finished goods.

The Factory Manager also has specific duties which he is responsible for apart from seeing to the overall running of the factory. He sees to the maintenance of the machines and he has 1 boilerman, 1 electrician, 3 fitters and 2 workshops apprentice to assist him in his functions. The Factory Manager is hence directly responsible for the upkeep and smooth functioning of the manufacturing machines.

At the other end, we have the processing and direct labour aspect of production. The Production Superintendent with the assistance of another man sees to the complete processing and packing of the product. The Production Superintendent is directly responsible for the organisation of work and work on the assembly line. He has 3 charge-hand to help him and these girls will execute his orders to the permanent and temporary workers on the line. This is the direct labour aspect of production work and they are responsible for the packing of the product. There are 2 fork-lifters who transport the finished goods to the store-rooms and they service the lines in general.

The Production Superintendent is aided by an assistant who sees to the processing of the product. The process workers maintain the manufacturing



machines and they are the ones who will see to the manufacture of the products which will in turn be packed by the workers on the line. The production Superintendent has 7 process workers aided by labourers to see to the manufacture of goods. The processing and final packing of the product together form the direct labour involved in the production and packing of the final product.

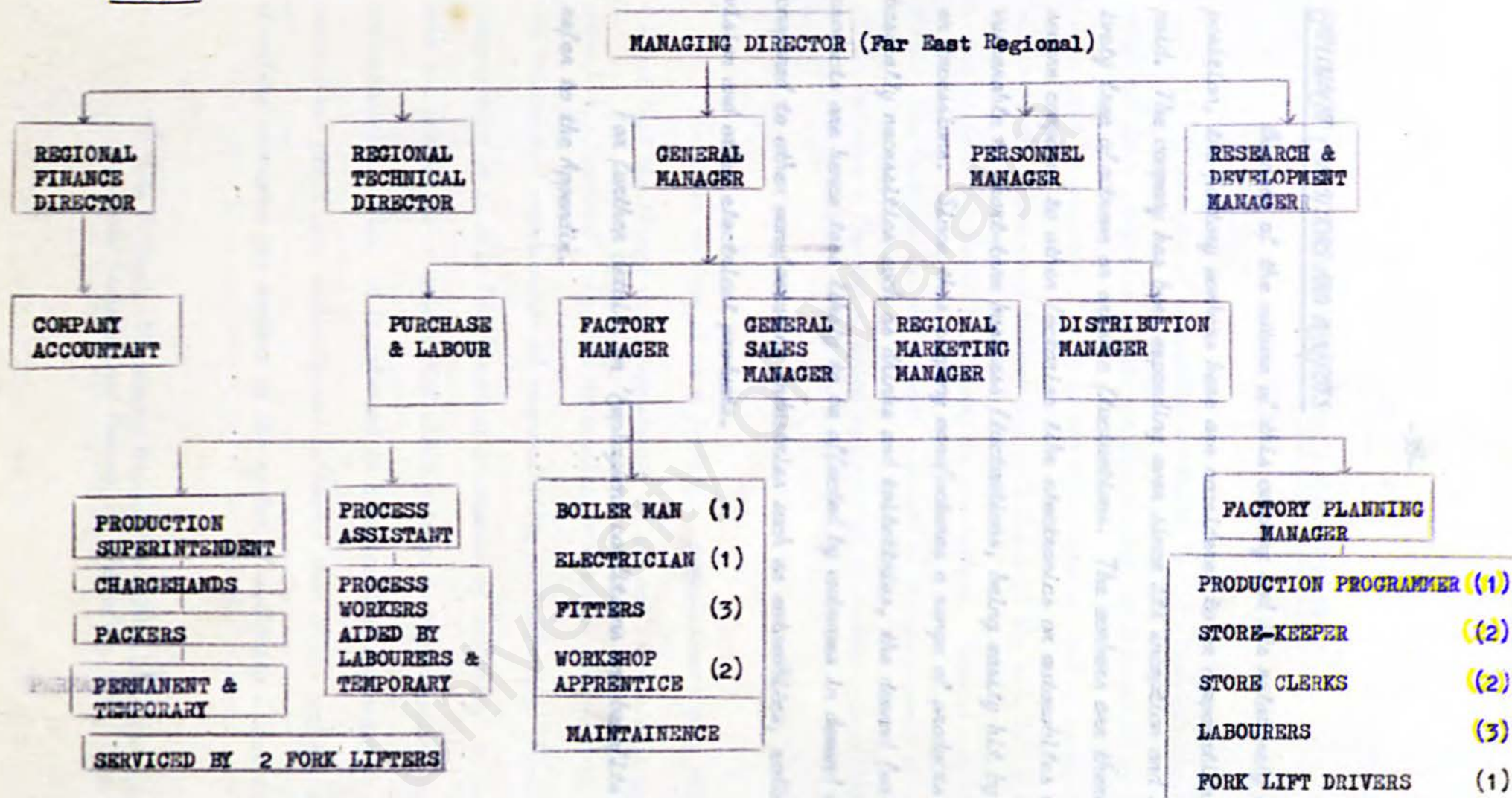
The authority structure can perhaps be better understood from the Table presented. It can be seen then that there are basically 2 aspects to the organisation of work in the factory. One sector involves the direct labour, which means the work performed in the manufacture of the production and work done on the assembly line which involves filling, labelling, capping and packing. On the other aspect, there is the service department. This section will see to the maintenance of the manufacturing machines, so as to guarantee that a constant supply of the required products will be maintained. Basically, this sector provides all the necessary services including planning of production, up-keeping and taking care of the machines and storing of the goods, in order to facilitate and ensure the smooth functioning of the factory.

Both these sectors are inter-dependent on each other. The Factory Manager, Factory Planning Manager, the Production Superintendent and the Production Chemist have to work in close co-operation with each other. Without the help of the service department, the process and packing lines cannot run, and without the existence or running of the assembly lines, the





TABLE 1



PRODUCTION LINE

MAINTENANCE AND SERVICES

## EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS AND BENEFITS

Because of the nature of this company and its relatively stable position, the factory workers here are considered to be comparatively well paid. The company has been expanding ever since its inception and it is relatively free of extreme or erratic fluctuations. The workers are therefore fairly secure compared to other factories like electronics or automobiles which are vulnerable to short-term business fluctuations, being easily hit by depressions or recessions. Since this company manufactures a range of products which are basically necessities such as drinks and toiletries, the demand for these products are hence less likely to be affected by extremes in demand changes as compared to other manufacturing industries such as automobiles, radio, television and other electrical products.

For further details on 'Employment conditions and benefits', please refer to the Appendix.

<sup>1</sup> John P. Lick, "Measuring Attention within a social system", American Sociological Review, 24 (November, 1959) Page 949-952



## CHAPTER 4

### ALIENATION AND THE FACTORY WORKER

#### 1. POWERLESSNESS

The essence of alienation according to J.P. Clark is "the degree to which man feels powerless to achieve the role he has determined to be rightfully his in specific situation."<sup>1</sup> It is man's feelings of lack of means (power) to eliminate the discrepancy between his definition of the role he is playing and the one he feels he should be playing in a situation. Perhaps in this particular context, the feelings are not so much a result of disappointment of one's expectations but more a feeling of being manipulated or dictated to within an organisation.

Finifter defines it as a feeling of powerlessness over one's affairs - a sense that the things that importantly affect one's activities and work are outside his "control". By this definition, alienation then is bound closely to the hierarchical organisation of responsibility and authority. Finifter further asserts that it is this "differential allocation of authority" to some members over the activities of others that distinguishes an organisation from other collectivities. Thus, it is inherent in a hierarchical organisation that some members are given more authority and influence than others and the organisation therefore separates its members by its system of authority - that is, the

<sup>1</sup> John P. Clark, "Measuring Alienation within a social system".  
American Sociological Review, 24 (December, 1959) Page 849-852



distribution of rights to influence the action of others - to varying degrees from decisions regarding their activities.

The degree of powerlessness was then measured with a 4-item scale.

This scale was used particularly to measure powerlessness that the workers experience and it tries to capture the resentment that workers may feel at being deprived by outside forces of greater control over one's work. It also measures the lack of influence and authority of the workers to effectively affect any decisions or suggestions regarding their work, their inability to use or discuss their ideas concerning their work and their feelings of powerlessness and resignation in face of the conveyor-belt.

Of the number interviewed, 63-8% agreed that they often did things in their work that they wouldn't do if it was left to them. 30% disagreed and 3-5% were not sure. A few felt that the work seemed enforced only if they were in a "bad mood" or if they were emotionally upset about things. The high percentage of workers who felt that they were doing things in their work that they wouldn't do voluntarily reflects the powerlessness of workers to refuse work orders given to them whether they liked it or not. It could also reflect the predominant fact that many of these girls do not see their work as an end in itself, but rather as a means to an end - their pay at the end of the month.

Regarding their influence in the factory, only 10% felt that they had some kind of influence or say in the way the factory is run. 90% felt that they



had no influence whatsoever. Only 50% felt that they could discuss ideas and make suggestions concerning their work to their superiors while the rest disagreed. Most of them felt that they had to work to prescribed orders and pre-determined procedures and that they were powerless against the dictates of the technical system.

(a) Powerlessness within the authority structure

In this study, alienation was also studied from the aspect of powerlessness which was closely linked to the authority structure of the factory. A sample representative of the working force was picked for the above study. The working force consists of about 154 factory workers who form the lowest rank of the hierarchical structure within the factory. They work mainly on the conveyor belt, although they can be called upon to perform any other duties pertaining to their work group, like serving in the canteen and even serving the office staff of the company. Within this group, neither has more influence or authority over the other, except in seniority or their employment condition, whether temporary or permanent but such differences are only incidental, perhaps contributing more to a sense of personal satisfaction rather than incurring any special status within the authority structure of the factory.

Above them in authority are three charge-hands or head girls ("hepala" in the local term) who have been given charge of executing the orders of the factory manager. They see to the overall performance of work, keep a tag on the



production level desired and in effect can be seen as a kind of "hench-men" of the factory manager. They also serve as a kind of liason between the girls and the authority above. They too perform work on the conveyer belt and hence are of close physical proximity with the girls.

The production superintendent is responsible for the supervision and organisation of the work of production workers and ensures that the agreed volume of products are produced and packed with minimum wastage in labour and machine time. He allocates work and deploys workers, maintains discipline and deals with personal problems of operations, reporting case if necessary to the factory manager.

The factory manager sees to the day-to-day running of the factory. He is responsible for the maintainence, care and security of the site. He maintains factory safety, keeping a close liason with the fire-works department. He is also responsible for the harmonious labour relations within the factory. This is then the authority structure within the factory. (For further details on the relationship between workers and their superiors, refer to chapter 3 on the 'Authority structure description of the factory').

According to Finifter, a condition that arouses intense alienation is the inability of subordinates to act back upon their superordinates.<sup>\*3</sup> The lack of communication or the inability of the worker to voice his feelings and

<sup>\*3</sup> Ib id, page 140



ideas about her work creates feelings of unimportance and discontent. The frustration of not being able to make one's feelings felt hence creates a sense of powerlessness.

Alienation has been found to be most intense under conditions of great disparity and to decrease with positional distance between subordinates and superordinate parties. The positional disparity, designating the distance between superordinate and subordinate, hence determines the extent of reciprocity between an authority and his subject. Wide positional disparity restricts reciprocity by increasing restraint and inhibition and decreasing spontaneity between an authority and his subject. Influence will only flow unilaterally along the lines of formal authority arrangements. Such restrictions on interaction limit the subordinates' ability to exercise influence on his superiors, hence, feelings of powerlessness are exacerbated.

On the other hand, interaction between authorities and subjects in adjacent positions could be free of such restrictions and workers are more free to express their feelings of work. This gives the worker a feeling that he has some influence over his superordinates and indirectly his own affairs. The extent of positional disparity therefore represents a condition that inhibits reciprocal influence by subordinates, and for the reason it is alienative.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., page 141



Based on the above, the positional disparity between the subordinate and superordinate was measured with the question, "There are many people who have something to say or do about the way the factory is run. Who has the most say or influence? (See Appendix). The respondent would choose from an order of Factory Manager, Production Superintendent, Charge-hand, anyone else and no one. Knowing the position of the respondent, the discrepancy between his position and that of the person he indicated as most influential can then be established. The widest discrepancy that can occur is when the Personnel Manager is being designated as the most influential person. This is a 4-step disparity, for in the order of authority, the Personnel Manager is 4 positions above the subject, with the Factory Manager, Production Superintendent and Charge-hand intervening. A three-step disparity if the Factory Manager was designated, and a two-step disparity represented by the designation of the Production Superintendent. The adjacent position or one-step disparity will be the designation of the Charge-hand.

A total of 66.6% named the Factory Manager as the most influential, 10% the Production Superintendent, 3.3% valued the Personnel Manager and 16.6% were not sure.

The workers have a clear understanding of the hierarchical authority structure of the factory. The fact that they designated the Factory Manager as the man of greatest influence does not reflect, in this case, so much the alienation of the workers as the fact that they know who holds the most authority concerning



their jobs. The fact that about 30% of the workers communicate with the Factory Manager about their problems show that the characteristic alienation of such a disparity is not as obvious here (refer to Appendix). Most of them felt that the Factory Manager was the best man to talk to because he can deal directly with their problems.

In the above, it was indicated that there is a desire among workers for influence over one's affairs and that if this desire is frustrated, alienation occurs. However, it is possible that influence on a certain amount of authority over one's affairs may not be desired by all, nor is everyone equally alienated when found in the same situation of positional disparity. The extent to which a person can be alienated because of lack of reciprocal influence depends on the level of status obedience.

Status obedience has been referred to as "the value placed on authority for its own sake and the deference shown there in positions higher than one's own". A highly obedient person will not feel that it is part of his rightful role to share influence with his supervisors, even where his own affairs are involved. He would probably regard authority as belonging exclusively to those in authority. Conversely, he would be unwilling to share what authority he might possess with those he considers inferior to himself.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page 141



Status obeisance was measured by the following items. 66.6% replied negatively to the question, "Do you ever feel like disagreeing with what your supervisor wants you to do or how she wants you to do it?". 36.6% felt that their supervisor knows better than anyone else what's good for the factory and 93.3% agreed that the best way to get along in the job is to mind their own business. 80% agreed that only the supervisors can tell them what to do and 90% preferred to have a supervisor to tell them what to do.

The findings show that most of the subjects are highly obeisant, and that they prefer to be directed by a figure of authority than to be left on their own to do whatever they like. They believe that the supervisor is essential to the running of the factory and that her presence can eliminate disputes between themselves regarding their work. The surprising findings could perhaps be explained by the cultural differences (as compared to the results found in Pearlin's paper in the *Alienation of Nursing Personnel*<sup>6</sup> where among Asians, the concept of filial piety and respect shown to those of authority and seniority to oneself exist.

Hence, because one does not desire to have any kind of influence or amount of control over one's own affairs, the workers may not be adversely affected by the alienative effects of wide positional disparity. As appropriately summed up by Fritster, "situations of great positional disparity do not

<sup>6</sup> Leonard J. Pearlin, *Alienation of nursing personnel: A study of Nursing Personnel*, page 314-326



result in feelings of deprivation, for one does not experience loss in not having something he does not expect nor feel is rightfully his".<sup>\*7</sup> The lack of desire for authority is also reflected in the response to the question, "Is the position of Charge-hand, a position to be desired or avoided", in which 63.3% replied negatively. Many felt that the position of charge-hand was a desire beyond their rightful role while others were influenced by feelings of inadequacy, lack of education and fear of coping with responsibilities that they might not be able to handle.

However, in spite of the high level of obeisance among these workers, they are nonetheless not totally indifferent to the way authority is exercised. Irregardless of positional relations or status obeisance, alienation can still occur if authority is exercised in such a way that it restricts or inhibits relatively free interaction. Included in the questionnaire was an item that observed how authority was exercised. The question asked was: "When your superior wants you to do something, how does he or she usually let you know what is wanted?". The subjects chosen from three categories of response in which 60% felt that they were simply told what to do, 30% felt that the supervisor explains to them what is wanted and 10% said that the superiors tells them what to do and explains to them what is wanted if necessary. In response to the item measuring resentment, 53.3% said that they felt resentful when the supervisor orders them to do something, especially in cases when they felt that they have been picked upon or that a certain amount of unfairness influenced the orders of the supervisor.

\*7 Ibid, page 142



The above shows that although the workers believe in concept of authorial respect, they can nevertheless still be alienated in the way authority is exercised. When ordered to do something, workers are made to feel inferior and uncomprehending about the operations of the factory. They are resentful when they are treated as mere components of the factory machinery, being manipulated and dictated to insensitively. When something is explained to them, they are made to feel very much a part of the overall running of the factory and that their help and understanding of their work is a valuable and important factor for the success of the factory.

(b) The Fight for Control

The essential feature of an assembly-line industry is the controlled pace of work determined entirely by the machine system rather than by the worker himself. Unlike other industries such as craft-industries, in which the worker can control the machines or his tools and has considerable freedom in the pace of work, the worker in a machine-tending industry is controlled and he has to work according to the rhythms and speed of the conveyor-belt. This not only pre-determines the techniques and rate of production but it also limits the movement of the worker.

Since the speed of the conveyor-belt is pre-determined, a worker will have to keep up with the speed of the machine or else run the risk of creating a jam and hence a complete slow-down of the work process. Most of the lines consist of a central conveyor-belt which carries empty containers and bottles, arranged



by workers onto the belt, towards a filling machine. The filling machine is automatic. The fastest filling machine can fill 75 bottles per minute and the slowest has 5 nozzles. The maximum speed is thus between 5 to 60 units per minute as the workers cannot work beyond this speed. The speed of the conveyor-belt is hence determined by the pace of the filling machine. Most of the lines can be considered as partially automatic as the speed of the belt is adjusted according to the rate of filling.

The filled containers and bottles are then capped either manually or mechanically. This process requires the worker to put on the necessary caps and foils which will then pass under the capping machine. In other cases, the covers are screwed on manually and the line carries the products further to a labelling station. Again, labelling can be automatic or manual or aided with the help of a man-operated labelling machine. The finished products are then carried towards the packing stop where they are then put into individual cases which are in turn packed into dozen boxes. Some other items are packed and sealed with a hand-and-leg operated plastic sealing machine.

Since the speed of the line is mechanically determined by the speed of the filling machine, the workers have to keep up with the pace of the machine. Often, a worker particularly when he is new to the job or slow, has to work at top speed in order to keep up with the line. Most workers do not have a chance to vary the pace of work at their own discretion and neither do they have any kind of opportunities at beating the line because the speed of work is so rapid that

the worker is more often trying to catch up with the line rather than keeping pace with it. Hence, the worker has little opportunities to resort to such means as "doubling-up" building "banks" or working "up-the-line" in order to maintain some kind of control over the speed of work. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Blawer's review of the "Auto Worker" based on two sociological studies, workers were forced to innovate illegitimate subterranean arrangements in order to maintain some control over their pace of work. In "doubling-up", a worker works furiously for an hour, performing not only his work but also that of the man at the next station. They then alternate every hour.

Sometimes, a worker tries to get ahead of the line and gains time by working on the products "up-the-line" before they reach one's own work station.

By building "banks", a worker can prepare all the caps and empty containers by his station, so this allows him to work slower than the line dictates. It is possible to do this but it means having to work a little earlier while others are relaxing or having their tea-break.



It is perhaps this aspect of work that is most unpleasant and probably the factor that causes the greatest amount of frustration in a worker. The major annoyance is perhaps not only the pace of work but its monotonous unchanging speed, which takes into no account the fact that for eight hours a day, most workers need a kind of variation in their efforts in line with rhythmic alterations in mood and fatigue. Because assembly-line workers cannot control the speed of the line, they are hence relatively powerless to influence the degree of pressure in their work situation. The worker has to stay by the line although he may be tired and fatigued in the heat of the afternoon, bored with the continuous monotony of the work and harassed by the rhythmic chaffing and hissing noises of the machines.

Of the number interviewed, 65% felt that the work made them work too fast most of the time and 67-5% reported that their work left them too tired at the end of the day. The remaining who did not feel the pressures of the fast pace of the line in fact admitted that they preferred a rapid speed as it makes "time fly" and therefore the day would seem shorter than it is. For those who were not affected by the pace of work, "challenge and excitement of keeping up with the line" compensates that would work/otherwise seem even more monotonous and boring. Other opinions were that one would feel less tired if the pace of work kept them busy all the time and also that the work was only tiring of one who was new to the line and unused to the heavy work. However, such opinions could be one way of rationalizing a situation that is inevitable and inescapable.

However, findings do not seem to show that workers are affected adversely by the speed of line in this particular factory. Quite often, the workers can redu



the speed of the line if it was felt that the workers could not keep up with the pace of work. There have been many occasions when the belt is stopped because of a "pile-up" of products and workers are not made to feel guilty of having caused a jam unless it happens too often. On the whole, the lines have been tuned in order to allow the workers to work within a certain manageable speed, probably because it has been realized that it would be more efficient and practical to run a machine within human capacities, rather than to drive the workers to impossible limits and thereby causing interruptions in work, "pile-ups" and havoc.

One other means whereby workers are relieved of monotonous rhythm are tea-breaks. Workers are given a tea-break of 15 minutes in the morning, and another in the afternoon. These short intermissions plus a forty-minute lunch break provide a kind of relief from the constant pace of work and in many ways, a worker's enthusiasm is refreshed after each break, making the come-back to work very much more tolerable.

To further increase variation in rhythm of work is the 6-monthly shifts. Work is constantly faster and heavier in some lines while lighter in others. Those workers who have been working on a line which is very fast can look forward to 6 months of comparatively easier work on another line. The change of work also helps to reduce the monotony of working permanently on the same line. However, because of the faster lines being often dictated by a high demand for productions workers are often reluctant to leave a particular line although the pace of work is rapid and difficult as they would lose the benefits of over-time which occurs more often on lines of high production.



However, although the worker may not seem to be badly affected by the speed of work, the lack of free movement makes the work oppressive. Just as powerlessness is expressed in the lack of control over the speed of the machine, this feeling is further exaggerated by the lack of free movement. The typical factory worker has limited physical movement except for those motions necessary to make his minute contribution to the final product. He must stay constantly near his place because of the speed in which the conveyor belt brings his work to him. He is unable to leave his station even for a couple of minutes as this would mean a pile-up in work, which in turn would hamper the work of his colleague along the rest of the line and the complete work process itself.

All the workers realise that they are tied to the machine, and they do not leave their station unless they are asked to or when they really have to and this can only be due if they can find someone to relieve them. (if they can find anyone at all). They are unable to leave even for the toilet without relief. However, there seems to be a kind of unvoiced understanding that the tea-breaks are the times for them to do what they want to do, thus, very few of them ever leave their stations during the process of work. Lack of free movement is greater felt especially in the heat of the afternoon, because of the fear of losing their jobs and the pressures of work, none of the workers ever leave the line unless necessary.

Assembly-line technology with its "massified" wage, skill and status structure has another alienative aspect and that is, it reduces the opportunities



for advancement. Not only are the workers alienated because they realise that they are one out of the many hundreds of factory workers similar to themselves, which increases their sense of anonymity, but they are frustrated too because they do not have an opportunity to extricate themselves from this situation. This inability to advance beyond their present situation also heightens the sense of powerlessness in a worker.

In assembly-line plants, there are relatively few skilled jobs that the non-skilled workers can aspire to. Many of the skilled jobs are often assigned to a skilled worker or maybe replaced by an under-study with some understanding of the mechanics of manufacturing machinery. Furthermore, because most of the skilled jobs are taken by men, the factory girls suffer a further set-back, namely their sexes. There are few opportunities or ladder for advancement in assembly-line work and a worker knows that being hired for one job, he is most likely expected to stay on that job. There are only 3 charge-hands assigned to the whole workforce and the chances of any of the girls replacing or aspiring to their positions are minimal. The charge-hands are in their mid-thirties and any worker hoping to advance in their jobs would have to wait for yet another ten to twenty years at least.

Although there are notices for more advance positions sometimes, such as store-keepers or salesman or some clerical jobs which are pinned on the factory fatness which are often the requirements for a higher position. This can be seen in the complaint of 32-5% of the workers who felt that their jobs were too easy.



notice board, such chances are often viewed with envy and embarrassment rather than positive aspirations. Many of the workers do not only recognise that their chances for advancement are practically minimal, but they have accepted that they cannot advance in their jobs because of their lack of education and skill and mainly because of the socialisation of low aspirations.

Although 32-5% expressed that they would like to be a charge-hand one day as compared to 53-3% who could not even imagine it and 10% who did not even know if they wanted to be a charge-hand or not, only 7.7% felt that they could make it to be charge-hand while 69-2% of the above felt negative and 23% were uncertain of their chances. The statistics show that even of the workers do have positive aspirations, their hopes are often accompanied by negative realizations. This is further emphasized by the fact that 52-5% of the workers felt that whether they performed well or not in their jobs, it would not lead to promotion and 30% of the workers did not know if their work would lead to promotion or not. Hence, the above reflects that not only are the workers more aware of the lack of advancement within their jobs, but they also realize that even if there was a position to aspire to, their chances for promotion are slim and negative.

Another factor contributing to the worker's high degree of alienation is the nature of work on the line. Unskilled, repetitive and stereotyped, it does not permit a man to demonstrate the qualities of skill, leadership and resourcefulness which are often the requirements for a higher position. This can be seen in the complaint of 32-5% of the workers who felt that their jobs were too easy



to bring out the best abilities in them. Although 37.5% of the workers felt that hard work and 12.5% added energy and willingness to work as the criteria for promotion, yet a relatively large percentage of 42.5% felt that it was pull and connection that got a man ahead. (42.5% chose: "How well he (the worker) gets on personally with his immediate boss as the criteria for promotion). This element of cynicism is perhaps in line with the frustration and the lack of opportunities that a worker feels is unavailable to him to get him ahead in his job. Perhaps it is easier to attribute luck and an attitude of cynicism to the chances of promotion rather than to admit that one's chances are not only minimal but not even feasible and that one is powerless or unable to improve one's lot.

Control over the pace of work is hence the most crucial and essential aspect of a job as retaining control in this area is a kind of affirmation of human dignity. This freedom is also crucial because it influences other areas of work freedom such as freedom from pressure, freedom of physical movement and the ability to control the quality and quantity of production, which together make up the immediate work process.

Although different work organisations may provide certain measures in order to allievate some of the pressures felt in this kind of work, such as tea-breaks, job rotation, and over-time benefits, there however do not succeed in eliminating the alienative tendencies of work in a modern industry. Instead, they seem like the eternal efforts that management will have to make in order to compensate for a system where main priority at conception is always the most rational



method of production according to the workers' value standards of "efficiency" but which invariably forgets that human considerations still is a very important "factor of Production".

## 2. MEANINGLESSNESS

A second dimension of alienation in industrial employment is meaninglessness. The nature of modern industries based on standardized production and division of labour reduces the size of the workers' contribution to the final product. The worker is also unable to find meaning in contributing towards a standardized product because it inevitably involves repetitive work cycles. Because the worker's contribution to the product is only minimal and limited to a restricted sphere, it is hard for him to comprehend the importance of his job to the organic whole of the product.

Hence, it is difficult for a worker on an assembly line to gain a sense of purpose and function in the kind of work that he does. It is impossible for the worker to find meaning in screwing caps or just watching bottles pass his station for 8 hours a day and every other day is not very much different from the last. The worker has got no sense of personal involvement in his job, he does not gain a sense of personal satisfaction or a sense of achievement in having created something, a product of his work which he can claim as his very own. Instead, his contribution is just minimal to the countless number of production units that pass



his station everyday and any trace of his work is as insignificant and anonymous as the millions of identical products that are packed.

Alienation of meaningfulness is further intensified by the worker's inability to identify with a particular job. The decision of labour in a modern industry is so extreme that most jobs are basically the same. There are so many lines with so many of the same jobs and there are just as many workers performing the same tasks. Fractionized job assignments, cyclic work rhythms and the anonymous atmosphere of the large plants all serve to dilute any sense of meaning, function or purpose on the assembly line.

Dissatisfaction with their job can be seen in 82-5% of the workers. Most of them felt that their jobs was too simple to bring out their best abilities. The lack of a sense of achievement was reflected in 52-5% of the workers in which they felt that their work would not lead to a promotion whether they did it well or not. Only a minimal of 10% expressed that their work was good while the rest felt that it was just "alright", "tolerable" ('boleh tahan') or "can do". This means that they only considered their jobs just as a means of earning a living.

This negative attitude towards their work could be a result of the kind of work that they do. The fact that they cannot identify themselves with any particular work task, each job being very much the same as the other (as expressed by most of the workers when asked which line they would choose to work



on, the immediate response was always "All work is the same") and that there is no sense of function or purpose in the highly compartmentalized work, all contribute to the high<sup>dis</sup>satisfaction with their jobs. The fact that more than half the work force feel that their job would not lead to any kind of promotion reflects the general sense of lack of achievement within their work-task.

Another aspect of meaningless work is that the worker is also unable to control the quantity of output. As the line determines the pace of the worker, he cannot decide to increase or reduce his production accordingly. He has to finish the number of units brought to him and work according to the pre-determined rhythms of the machine. He has no idea whatsoever how much he has to produce each day. All he knows is that he may have to work faster or slower which for the worker is the only indication of the level of production.

Just as the worker is unable to control the quantity of production, he is also unable to control the quality of production. The assembly-line works against whatever desire a worker may have to measure up to his own standards of excellence. The difficulty of producing both "quality and quantity" in work is due again to the constant speed of the conveyor belt.

Furthermore, because jobs are so standardized and the atmosphere of large assembly plants are so anonymous and impersonal, there is little incentive and emptiness of his existence when he spends a major part of each day of his life in monotonous meaningless tasks.



for workers to achieve quality in their work. Only workers who desire a kind of satisfaction from maintaining quality against the speed of the machine will achieve some kind of control over the quality of their work. Some of the girls would insist on seeing that the caps are screwed on tightly or that every label is straight and in place, as compared to other girls who may be indifferent to any task altogether. However, this illustrates the personal efforts taken by some individuals, who in their own ways, try to find some kind of challenge and meaning in a job that is hardly novel to them anymore.

Perhaps the only need to meet up to quality is at the packing station. A worker is required to print on each pack of finished product that has been sealed his serial number. It is only perhaps at this station that a worker may be more conscious of his proficiency of work but this serves less as a challenge for the worker and more as another means of control that the assembly-line has over the worker which he cannot repudiate.

Hence, because of the nature of their work, the workers find it hard to find some kind of meaning not only in their work but indirectly in their personal lives. Because routine and cyclic work tasks do not contribute to personal growth, intellectual or spiritual stimulation but simply reduce the worker into a working automation, the feeling of meaninglessness is extended even into their personal lives. It would be difficult for any worker to ignore the shallowness and emptiness of his existence when he spends a major part of each day of his life in mundane meaningless tasks.



### 3. SELF-ESTRANGEMENT

When a worker lacks control over the work process and a sense of purposeful connection in the work enterprise, he may experience a kind of depersonalized detachment rather than an involvement or engrossment in the job tasks. Because of the kind of work that the assembly-line entails, it is often then that we find workers experiencing a kind of detachment from their work. Because the worker cannot involve himself, or his inner self in the activity of work, self-estrangement or self-alienation occurs.

Self-estranging work is also experienced as a heightened awareness of time and work which is compulsive, driven by necessity rather than being free & spontaneous since self-estranged work is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself, the satisfaction then is in the future rather than in the present and this worker is hence detached from his immediate work process.

72.5% of the workers interviewed admitted that it was possible for them to work on the job and keep their minds on other things at the same time. The troubled mother is thinking of her children or husband, the single girl of what she will do when she returns home, the bored worker is thinking of the time when the bell will sound, etc. It is possible for most of the workers to maintain a kind of detachment to their jobs because of the very nature of the work. The cyclic repetition of work tasks and the lack of challenge in work that is too simple does not demand very much attention or skill for the worker.

The relatively relaxed atmosphere of the factory can yet be another factor governing the low level of boredom felt. The assembly-line has the workers



Because the worker cannot be involved in simple tasks, a further consequence of self-alienating work is hence boredom and monotony. However, only 10% of workers felt that their jobs is pretty dull and monotonous most of the time, whilst 70% found their jobs interesting most of the time, but with some dull stretches now and then. Perhaps the fact that most of the workers are not so valued to have very high aspirations of work could explain why most workers are quite satisfied with their jobs.

One factor which is most important in influencing man's low aspirations in the work process is education. The more educated and intelligent the man, the greater will be his need for mental stimulation and satisfaction of intrinsic values. The fact that 22-5% of the workers interviewed had no education at all, with 42-5% barely finishing a primary education and only 35% having completed their secondary education at the M.C.E. (or 'O' level) level, could perhaps explain why a majority of the workers did not find their work boring.

Another reason could be the feature of job rotation and ample tea-breaks in between the work process. Workers are not only given a new line of work in every 6 months, but there is job rotation after each break. Workers change their jobs from labelling to filling, or capping to packing after each break. Perhaps it is this constant change of work duties which help to eliminate the degree of boredom and monotony that often characterizes assembly-line work.

The relatively relaxed atmosphere of the factory can yet be another factor governing the low level of boredom felt. The assembly-line has the workers



all seated or standing in a row, sometimes 2 workers perform the same work, facing each other, while at times, there may be as many as 4 to 6 girls at a picking station. The opportunity to chat and gossip with relatively minimal supervision or reprimand from the supervisor creates quite a cheerful atmosphere in the factory. The fact that the work is simple enough and does not demand that much concentration and attention offers the girls a relief from what would otherwise be monotonous torture. However, there are some other lines which operate very much faster but in such cases, there is a sense of present engrossment and the speed is taken as a challenge rather than a compulsion in this case. But this does not mean that the workers in this case are less satisfied in their work than those who have the opportunity to chat, as work with or without companionship is not of much importance to the workers, because the nature of the work would not alter much either way. (refer to chapter on Social Alienation).

However, the fact that the workers may not find their job monotonous need not necessarily mean that they find it rewarding or meaningful to their personal or self-development. It is difficult for one to feel that one is advancing or making changes to one's personal life when one spends the major part of one's life doing hum-drums and mundane tasks. Workers are rarely able to gain very much technical experience, except in the handling of certain hand-operated machines like the filling, labelling or capping machines, and the experience gained from assembly-line work would perhaps only help them to gain another job in another factory, rather than aid them in acquiring a job in another field. The fact that 82-5% of



the workers felt that their job was too simple to bring out their best abilities shows that although they may not be bored by their job, they nevertheless realise that they may not be taking the best of their abilities or talents in their present job. That 72-5% chose their present factory as good a place as any other to be in reflects not so much their resignation to the state of circumstances, but perhaps also that it's a recognition of the fact that with their kind of "experience" and education, they could not be better off anywhere else.

Perhaps one of the best indicators of self-alienating work is the fact that at least 70% of the workers expressed that they work for the pay, and not because they enjoyed the work, in response to the question "Why do you work?" The given responses were (1) The work is good or (2) the pay is good. Hence, because a person works for financial incentives rather than personal meaning in the work activity, he can then be considered as alienated along the self-estrangement dimension considered by Seeman. (see chapter on Alienation: Its Concept).

Because the nature of the work is generally unrewarding in itself and the status of occupation is relatively low, work in a factory hence contributes little to a man's sense of worth and self-esteem.. Standardized mass-production work does not provide an occupational identity that is approved of by the community at large or by the worker himself. Many of the workers feel that working in a factory is degrading because of the low social value attributed to it. Hence, when asked whether they would choose the same line of work if they could start their



lives over again, only 11% said "yes". 65% replied that they would rather be something else than a factory worker if the circumstances had been different. Many said that they would have liked to be a teacher or an office girl. The fact that these were the 2 most likely occupations chosen could perhaps be attributed to the social values attached to the teaching profession and the glamorous aspect of being an office girl. 50% indicated that they would not work at the factory for the rest of their lives, while 42.5% said they would and 7.5% were not sure. 50% said that they would leave their jobs if given a chance, while 32.5% were negative about leaving and 17.5% <sup>were</sup> not sure. The most likely reasons given for the opportunity in leaving their jobs were if there were better alternatives or job opportunities elsewhere, "more pay", family considerations and the chance of going back to their "home-town" ("hampong").

The above responses could perhaps be the most effective guides to the worker's feelings about their occupations. The fact that they may find their work interesting and even challenging in some cases should not mislead one into the illusion that the work is hence intrinsically rewarding. Some of the more positive and optimistic responses of the workers could perhaps be seen as an adaptation or resignation to their "fate" (as many of them see it) or an adjustment to the present circumstances until they can find better opportunities although many expressed their doubts about a "better future". A majority of them realise that they could not be better off elsewhere because of their lack of education and experience. Others expressed their low level of intelligence, lack of good looks (as a "conceived" pre-requisition for getting a job in an office) and skills that could perhaps get them a job elsewhere.



Hence, when a piece of work is done not because of the work itself but because it is the "best" way out of a hopeless situation or because the pay is good and it "could-not-be-better" elsewhere, this could then be the essential meaning of self-estrangement.

The fact that 70% find their work interesting and not monotonous and that 35% would choose to work in a factory again should not be taken as an indicator of intrinsically rewarding work but rather more as a realistic reconciliation that the worker has adopted as the most practical attitude to one's circumstances. The average factory worker is an alienated worker because his work has been almost completely compartmentalized from other areas of his life, and there is little meaning left in it beyond the instrumental purpose. The heavily mechanized industry with its own automatic pace of work allows the worker minimal control over the speed or pressure of his work and the highly standardized tasks deprive the worker of any sense of job satisfaction (other than financial satisfactions) or meaning.

#### 4. SOCIAL ALIENATION

Assembly-line technology has the tendency of reducing the cohesion it does not promote work done by an organized or informal functional group but instead the high division of labour emphasises individual contribution rather than



cohesiveness. What is important is each man's contribution to the whole, and his main concern would be the selected task that he has been appointed to do. The worker's role does not extend beyond his specified task and because of the pace and pressure of work, a worker is hardly allowed to contribute anything more than what he is required to do.

Thus, it is the very nature of this kind of work technology that reduces social integration within a work force. Firstly, the high division of labour requires that each worker be placed at a certain station, at regular distances along the line. This situation sometimes allows the workers to chat and joke if 2 or 3 workers happen to be working at the same station. In other cases, most workers are situated alone and the chances for communication are only minimal or completely absent. Secondly, the pace of work (especially on the very rapid lines) demands a certain amount of attention and hence, social interaction on the faster lines are normally reduced. Furthermore, the sound of the machinery can be so loud at times that the noise prevents any sensible conversation. The fact that the worker is tied to the line during the process of work also restricts his physical mobility and consequently the extent of his social interaction, limiting him only to the company of the workers at hand.

Perhaps it is because of all these factors and the possibility that workers may have already adapted themselves to a socially alienating system that 84% of all workers felt that having someone to sit and talk with during the process of work is unimportant. The workers have accepted a situation where



perhaps the presence of company is only as rewarding as an occasional <sup>offer</sup> shorter work-time when it is least expected. The usual response to the question if they like to have company is always, "if I have company, fine, if not, it's alright". This is probably a reflection of the worker's acceptance of one of the many conditions that accompanies their kind of work rather than a situation that they would voluntarily choose for themselves.

This is shown in the response to the question, when asked if they preferred to work in a line where they can have someone to talk to, 72-5% replied "yes". The fact that 72-5% felt that their work is more unpleasant and boring when they are working alone also shows that the presence of company, although may not be required can nevertheless help to alleviate the feelings of alienation and loneliness. 42.5% confessed that sometimes, they feel all alone and isolated when they are working while 57.5% disagreed with the statement.

However, some felt that having someone to sit and talk with would distract them and hence, be a hindrance to their work. Yet others are afraid to make too much of the opportunity to chat and talk with friends, as they are afraid that being caught talking too often may affect their jobs. Another view expressed that less social interaction would be better as gossips and too much involvement can result in petty personality conflicts and trouble. Furthermore, many would rather be less intimate with fellow workers because they see the others as a threat to their jobs. They felt that if they said too much of themselves and what they felt, their statements can be misconstrued by others and vicious fellow-workers may stir



trouble for them. This last statement is perhaps a contradiction to the fact that in spite of the high percentage of workers who feel secure about their jobs (72.5% expressed that they can have their jobs for as long as they want), they nevertheless would not take any risk that might cause them to lose their jobs. The feelings of security are often accompanied by the realization that they could keep their jobs for as long as everything goes well on condition they do their work accordingly and obediently. However, they do admit that they are uncertain about the many things that can arise to terminate their jobs, and such circumstances are those beyond their control. The above example of suspicion of fellow workers would perhaps be considered as one of the unpredictable circumstance that workers feel could cause him to lose his job.

Furthermore, the assembly-line technology does not only hinder social interaction within the work force but the characteristics of its work task to limit relationships only to a superficial level. The fact that workers are not encouraged to work as a team, or even as a pair means that work is always assigned with only individual considerations. Hence, a worker can often be transferred from time to time, depending on whether they have enough workers on a particular line or where they would need more workers. Any worker can be taken out from a particular line to work on another whenever it is needed. Thus, a worker can rarely have enough time to get to know any one individual or social group in depth, relationships being dictated only by the time that the worker is assigned onto that particular line, and hence work-group.



Lack of social integration then can be seen as something that the workers accept as part and parcel of their jobs. The more sociable ones would chat and joke just so that time passes faster, the job would seem less monotonous and boring and making their time on the line more pleasant. The quieter workers prefer to keep to themselves, as any social interaction would end as soon as the work ends anyway. Social interaction is then only limited to the time of work and only 20% of the workers claimed to have any good friends from the factory. Although all the workers asked said that all their fellow-workers were their friends and they do socialise with them outside work, it was only a minimal number who seemed to have found any lasting relationships from the factory work force.

dull, repetitive and devoid of meaning.

Thus, because the nature of work places its emphasis in individual rather than team or functional group contribution, relationships both on a personal or even work level is shallow. Because there is no basis for deeper and more lasting relationships, most workers accept their social relations with their fellow worker as a practical and convenient aspect of their job. Social relationships hence fail to give them that sense of belonging or membership within a social group that would instil in them some sense of identification, if not with the work organisation as a whole, then at least as part of the "mass society" that has become such a prominent landmark in the modern industrial state of today.

Furthermore, the workers are not only alienated from themselves in the process of work but also from their work force as a whole and society at large. The fast pace of assembly-line technology has been found to hinder personal inter-



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

In the proceeding chapters, alienation has been studied from the four aspects of powerlessness, meaninglessness, self-estrangement and social alienation. It has been seen then that most of the workers have been deemed powerless by the lack of control over the speed and pace of the work, his inability to handle the pressure that is inherent in assembly-line technology and the limitations on his freedom of movement, which inevitably results in the "machine-controlled" man. The worker is also alienated from his work because conveyor-belt work is monotonous, dull, repetitive and devoid of meaning.

The workers were also unable to identify with any particular tasks because of the highly standardized organisation of work into minutely subdivided tasks, and hence they encountered difficulty in trying to find meaning, purpose or function in work on the assembly-line. Not only is the work process devoid of meaning but at the same time, monotonous and repetitive tasks do not demand self-involvement and creative participation. Because most of the workers are involved in work that is not self-expressive or self-actualizing, a sense of self-alienation was experienced.

Furthermore, the workers are not only alienated from themselves in the process of work but also from their work force as a whole and society at large. The fast pace of assembly-line technology has been found to limit personal inter-



action and act as a deterrent to co-operative work forces. Social interaction in the factory was only limited to a superficial level because of the nature of work and hence, long-lasting relationships with fellow workers are rare. The difficulty of finding one's identity among the mass of blue-collar workers was not only prevalent within the working situation, but the factory worker is also an "outcast" with society in general. Because of the nature of work and attitudes of social discrimination, and prejudice alluded to factory work, workers are also assailed by feelings of general disapproval.

In face of all the aspects of assembly-line work, it would seem then that alienation is inevitable. However, in spite of the evidence presented that man is alienated in the process of mechanical work, the extent and degree of alienation can yet be affected by certain general phenomena. Alienation is also variable under different work situations and susceptible to such influences as adaptation, education, cultural and personal differences and the present economic conditions, and hence employment opportunities.

Although it has been noted that workers are alienated in the process of work, adaptation and an eventual acceptance of one's "fate" plays an important role in alleviating the feelings of alienation. Many of the factory workers are old and have gained seniority on their jobs. The long years of service in the factory also promises them certain benefits like pay increase and eventual pension that would be due to them. Furthermore, other alternatives are few and uncertain especially



for many who are already in their middle-age, or too old to look for other jobs, Besides, they have gained too much economic security after the long years of service to make a move. The present working condition is satisfactory, or even better for those who have had worse experiences elsewhere. The feelings that assembly-line work, being very much the same anywhere else, is perhaps another deterrent to their desires to make a new life. For many of the older workers, it would be safer then to stay on a job that a relatively secure and satisfactory, rather than run the risk of losing a job altogether if they fail to find alternative employment.

For the younger ones, there is a prominent capacity for one to adopt to the routine and repetitive work. One eventually gets used to the meaninglessness, the speed and pressure of work and also because, work is relatively easy and non-demanding, one is eventually glad not to be burdened with responsibilities and other pressures of more challenging work. One's mind is eventually tuned to accept the hum-drum of factory work and one's needs and aspirations are eventually diluted and moulded to fit one's present state and circumstance. Hence, it can be seen that although alienation may be high in other aspects of work, 75-5% expressed their commitment in staying with the present company.

It is amazing sometimes how one's circumstances can inevitably influence one's way-of-life and needs. Perhaps acceptance of and adaptation to their occupation would see a safe and practical approach to adopt in face of the present



circumstances. It would perhaps be most uncomfortable if one's body and mind is perpetually rejecting the kind of work one is involved in and if the work does not quit in due time (which would be inevitable in the above case), then he can be eventually conditioned to accept factory work as his way-of-life. The human capacity to adapt and the amazing resilience of man can perhaps then explain why although alienated from the kind of work that they do, many workers still stay on their jobs.

It has been stated in the preceding chapters that workers are alienated and dissatisfied when their needs for control and meaning in work are frustrated. However, such needs and aspirations are often and most likely influenced by education. The more education a person has received, the greater the need for control and creativity. For those with little education, the need for sheer activity (working to keep occupied) and for association are more important than control, challenge and creativity.<sup>1</sup> The average manual worker is often satisfied with fairly steady jobs which are largely instrumental and non-involving because they have not the need for responsibility and self-expression in work. Many of them are therefore relatively content with work which is simply a means to the larger end of providing the pay checks at the end of each month. A manual worker whose work does not involve variety, control, purpose or responsibility, whose education has not awakened such aspirations and whose opportunities do not include realistic alternatives, will not have such a great need for intrinsically fulfilling work.

<sup>1</sup> Eugene Friedman and Robert Havighurst, "The Meaning of Work & Retirement", 1954, Page 54



Furthermore, besides education, intelligence, personality and the occupation itself are also important factors. To some extent, it is the work itself which a person acquires that will instill him with specific needs to be satisfied or frustrated in work situations.

Of the number of workers interviewed, hardly half of them had advanced beyond a secondary level education, 35% of the workers have reached the mid-level of secondary education (LCE) and only 22-5% have obtained their MCE ('O' levels). The rest 42.5% have had either a couple of years of primary education or none at all. For the bulk of these workers then, control, meaning and self-expression in work is unimportant, relative to their needs for survival and employment. Those that are hardly educated are even glad that they have managed to find employment and they will be every willing to do everything to keep their jobs rather than to challenge the existing aspects of work and run the risk of losing the little economic benefits that they have secured.

Furthermore, in face of the present economic situations in Malaysia, where employment is hard to come by, factory workers will be the least ready to complain about their jobs. The reported unemployment rate in 1978/79 was 6.3%. According to statistics obtained from the registers of the Employment Services of the Manpower Department, most of the registrants looking for work were in the 15-19 age group (89% of the total registrants). There were registered mainly for jobs requiring minimum educational qualifications such as production workers,



transport equipment operators and labourers. Furthermore, figures from the reports indicated that retrenchment of workers during 1978 affected especially the manufacturing industry. During the first half of 1978, out of a total of 483 workers who were retrenched, 225 were manufacturing workers.<sup>\*2</sup>

Thus, it would seem that the factory workers are up against stiff competition where employment opportunities for them are concerned. A reflection of the above statistics (which may even be an under-estimated count as many of the unemployed in the country may not even be registered with the Employment Service) can perhaps help to illustrate the limited alternatives the worker has in face of the rare employment opportunities available. For many of the uneducated ones, factory work is probably their best alternative at getting some form of employment especially after many unsuccessful attempts elsewhere.

Perhaps the low expectations of work satisfaction and aspirations in job advancement would be a result of the employment conditions. With so few jobs available to the average worker, one cannot afford to be too discriminating. In face of the above conditions, most Malaysians from the lower social and economic classes are basically not socialised and educated to seek for high intrinsic values in work. For many, a job is a means of living, and the pay-check at the end of each month guarantees support for oneself or maybe even one's family. Even for many of the educated a job is seen more as a means to material comfort and hopes of a car, a house and all the furnishings typical of an affluent life are often more important

<sup>\*2</sup> Economic Report, Ministry of Finance, Malaysia, 1978/79, Page.140



considerations than job satisfaction. It is perhaps understandable then that for many of the workers, what affects <sup>them</sup> most could be their pay rather than any of the other aspects pertaining to work, and the absence of opportunities to develop inner potential, to express idiosyncratic abilities and to assume responsibility and decision making functions may not be a source of discontent to most workers today.

One must bear in mind too that the concept of alienation has most often been dealt with from the aspect of the western blue-collar worker. Western society has developed to a stage where material comforts are not only sufficient but often available in abundance. For most workers of the West then, socialisation has moulded them to look for a job as more than a means of earning a living. Intrinsic values like job satisfaction and work interest are important considerations for more Western blue-collar workers than Asians. Besides, the educational system being more advanced and developed, primary education and in some countries even secondary education free and obligating for all. With the higher level of education, wants and desires are again differently orientated. Hence, it could be likely that alienation could perhaps be more prevalent among the Western labour force than among Asians. Work to most Asians is a means of earning a living. In a land where people are still starving and poverty is comparatively widespread, the need for work with or without job satisfaction is essential.

Hence, cultural differences, i.e. differences in social values could again affect the degree of alienation among workers. Asians are more often orientated to



accept work as a means to an end, an instrument to material comforts and even for survival rather than as a self-rewarding or mental stimulating exercise.

Perhaps it can be mentioned at this stage then, that to talk about job satisfaction with a factory worker would seem quite irrelevant in face of the present economic and social context. The look of amusement and sometimes bewilderment that dawns a worker's face when the topic of job dissatisfaction is mentioned perhaps indicates the incredulity of stating what most workers have accepted as fact. They are aware that their kind of work is the least stimulating activity to them, but they are staying on because they have no other choice. A debate on the job satisfaction of a factory worker would perhaps be as redundant as talking about animal cruelty to a fisherman or a hunter.

Thus, in the light of the above, what is the future of the factory worker? Bound unwillingly to an unrelentless mindless machine, pressured by the indomitable and rapid assembly-line, alienated from the fellow worker and isolated from his fellow social beings, it would seem that the inevitable is to quit. But what are the alternatives?

For the girls in this factory, and thousands more like them, quitting is perhaps the last thing that they would resort to. The alternatives are few and limited, and their personal back-ground limits rather than extend their occupational scope. It is perhaps because of this, that the capitalist mode of production can thrive.



Hence, however unpleasant and degenerating their job may be, for many it is their "rice-bowl". For others, it is a supplement to the family income and it gives them if not freedom in the work situation, then, at least a certain amount of independence as a self-sufficient earning individual.

Perhaps the capitalist mode of production with its automated industrial technology can never, because of the inherent characteristics of its work, be really free of alienation. As long as man is expected to work with machines and is controlled by the work situation, it could be too idealistic perhaps to talk of a totally unalienated man. Alienation persists in some degree if not at all times in everyone of us. In a rapidly developing society, when man is perpetually imposed with a wide variety of conflicting norms attitudes and values, he will, because of his innate ability to feel, think and react differently at one time or another, experience some form of alienation from the overall social structure. The issue here then is not just a cry down and protest against alienation within the present economic systems but a hope that in attempting to expose the situations which are alienative, one should realise that although alienation cannot be totally eliminated it can nevertheless be alleviated to some extent with better forms and variations of automated industries which in turn can result in different modes and levels of freedom.

*Economic Report, Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 1971/72, Page 130*

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## APPENDIX

### EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS AND BENEFITS

#### Salary and working hours

The working hours of the factory worker are from 7.45 am to 4.45 pm with a lunch break from 11.40 am to 12.10 pm. They work for 42½ hours per week from Monday to Fridays.

The worker in this company are paid a basic salary of \$205 + \$30 per month. When required to work overtime on a working day, the worker is paid 1½ times his hourly rate for each hour of work. When a worker is required to work on a Saturday or Sunday or gazetted public holidays he will be reimbursed for his meal expenses, plus a day's pay of not less than one day's wage in addition to the ordinary rate of pay for the day.

A comparison of salary benefits with 2 other companies of almost the same kind of industry can perhaps help to illustrate the economic position of the workers in this factory, relative to the others. A table of salary scale and scale steps, with figure of pay increment may perhaps throw some light on the salary benefits of these workers.

#### Leave

Workers in the company are granted leave according to the table of annual leave presented, in comparison to 2 other companies. The company also grants as paid holidays all public holidays gazetted as Federal holidays and state



public holidays in which the employee is usually employed. Furthermore, the company will grant at its sole discretion, special paid leave for such purposes as examinations, Trade Union courses and other circumstances. Sick leave must be approved by the registered medical practitioner and a worker is entitled to paid sick leave as follows:-

- (1) 30 days sick leave each year if no hospitalisation is necessary;
- (2) 60 days each year in aggregate if hospitalisation is necessary.

Paid casual leave at straight time rate of pay are also available to workers in the event of proven cases in the following circumstances:-

- (1) employee's marriage - 2 days;
- (2) birth of his legal child - day of birth and 1 day;
- (3) death of a family member - the working day in which the death was made known to him plus 2 additional days.

Maternity leave is granted upon presentation of certificate from the company doctor and the company shall grant a female employee of a total of 2 calendar months maternity leave on full salary.

#### Medical and other benefits

All employees are eligible for free medical attention and treatment with the company approved doctors. The total amount of medical expenses including hospitalisation charges, specialist and operation fees is limited to M\$1,000.



If the worker should suffer from any prolonged disease or illness, then he is entitled to 5 months of full pay and 5 months of half-pay leave in addition to his sick leave entitlement.

All employees are also insured under the MAPTB (Malaysian Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis) group insurance scheme, and are required to undergo X-ray and medical checks from time to time.

The workers are also entitled to 2 months bonus each year. The company also pays 15% of employees basic salary to the Employees Provident Fund which provides the employees with some form of income on retirement.

Apart from these, the employees are given other benefits like M\$100 wedding gifts and incentives of 10, 15 and 25<sup>year</sup> awards for service.

The employment conditions of workers in this factory have been compared to those of 2 other factories. Apart from the few differences in certain aspects, the workers can be considered to be relatively better off than most other factory workers where material benefits are concerned. For many, these benefits are much better than any that they have experienced with other factories that are not so well established or alternative employment which would most likely be as a house-help, tailoring, waitressing or other forms of manual jobs. It must be noted too that the comparison figures have been made with 2 other large factories so one can expect greater differences if it had been compared to other industries or a smaller company.



# SALARY SCALE AND SALARY SCALE STEPS

FACTORY	ANNUAL INCREASE IN MALAYSIAN DOLLARS											
X	205	220	235	250	265	280	295	310	325	340	355	370
A	200	215	230	245	260	275	290	305	320*	335	355	375
B	180	192	204	216	228	243	258	273	288	303		

FACTORY X HAS \$15 INCREASE PER MONTH TILL \$670.

FACTORY A - THE JOB RATE FOR LINE GIRL PACKER IS \$200 WITH \$15 INCREASE.

THE FEMALE OPERATOR STARTS WITH \*\$375, WITH AN ANNUAL INCREASE OF \$20.

FACTORY B - SALARY STRUCTURE:-

$$\$180 \times \$12 \times 4 = \$228 \times \$15 \times 5 = \$303$$

## WORKING HOURS

FACTORY	WORKING HOURS / WEEK
X	42½
A	40
B	38½



ANNUAL LEAVE (PAID)

FACTORIES	X	A	B
YEARS OF SERVICE & NUMBER OF DAYS OFF	1-3 YRS. - 11 DAYS 4-5 YRS. - 13 DAYS 6-7 YRS. - 16 DAYS 8-15 YRS. - 18 DAYS 16+ ABOVE - 21 DAYS	1-5 YRS. - 11 DAYS 6-9 YRS. - 15 DAYS 10-14 YRS. - 17 DAYS 15-19 YRS. - 20 DAYS AFTER COMPLETION OF 20 YRS. OR MORE - 21 DAYS	1-5 YRS. - 10 DAYS 6-9 YRS. - 15 DAYS 10-14 YRS. - 17 DAYS 15-19 YRS. - 18 DAYS 20 YRS. & OVER - 20 DAYS



NB. All information used in the above were abstracted from the Collective Agreement at the time of research. The conditions are therefore subject to negotiations.

		PRODUCTION SCHEDULE	FATIGUE RANGE	WASTAGE RANGE	WASTE
1	0	4 (100%)	21 (67.5)	1 (2.5%)	2 (30%)
2	10 (25%)	1 (2.5%)	12 (30)	0	2 (17.5%)

Item 1: There are many people who have something to say about the way the factory is run and what its products are like. The first step is to find out what they have to say.

Item 2: What do you think it is when you want to ask something regarding your work, or you are not happy about the way things are done?

#### EXERCISE LEVEL AND INDUSTRIAL DISASTERS

EXERCISE (Years)	REASON	PRODUCTION SCHEDULE	FATIGUE RANGE	WASTAGE RANGE	WASTE
PROBUD	3	2	9		1
L.C.C.		1	11		2
A.C.C.		1	6	2	
TOTAL	3	4	26	2	3



POSITIONAL DISPARITY IN AUTHORITY RELATIONS

ITEMS	HEADGRL	PRODUCTION SUPERINTENDENT	FACTORY MANAGER	PERSONNEL MANAGER	NO-ONE
1	0	4 (10%)	27 (67.5)	1 (2.5%)	8 (20%)
2	20 (50%)	1 (2.5%)	12 (30)	0	7 (17.5%)

Item 1 : There are many people who have something to say about the way the factory is run and what to produce, who has the most say or influence.

Item 2 : Who do you talk to when you want to ask something regarding your work, or you are unhappy about the way things are done.

EDUCATION LEVEL AND POSITIONAL DISPARITY

EDUCATION (Years)	HEADGRL	PRODUCTION SUPERINTENDENT	FACTORY MANAGER	PERSONNEL MANAGER	NO-ONE
PRIMARY	3	2	9		3
L.C.E.		1	11		2
M.C.E.		1	6	2	
TOTAL:-	3	4	26	2	5



OBEISANCE MEASURED BY A 4-ITEM SCALE

ITEMS	YES		NO	
	PERCENTAGE	NO.	PERCENTAGE	NO.
1	67.5	27	32.5	13
2	87.5	35	12.5	5
3	92.5	37	7.5	3
4	80	32	20	8
5	90	36	10	4

ITEMS:-

- 1 Do you ever feel like disagreeing with what your supervisor wants you to do or how she wants you to do it?
- 2 I figure my supervisor knows better than I what's good for the factory or else he/she wouldn't be a supervisor.
- 3 The best way to get along in this job is to mind your own business and just do as you are told.
- 4 The supervisor should be the only one who can tell is what to do or else nothing will be done around here.
- 5 I prefer that my supervisor tells us what to do than to choose what I would like to do for myself.



THE WAY AUTHORITY IS EXERCISED

Responses	No	Percentage
Told to do it	24	60%
Asked to do it	4	10%
Explained why )	12	30%
It's to be done )		
Total:-	40	100%

(1) When your supervisor wants you to do something, how does he or she usually let you know what is wanted.

Proportion of workers who are resentful when asked to do something.

Responses	No.	Percentage
Yes	21	52.2%
No	19	47.5%
Total:-	40	100%



PROPORTION OF WORKERS ALIENATED BY THEIR WORK TASK

Items	Yes		No		Don't know	
	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count
1	65%	26	35%	14	0	0
2	67.5%	27	32.5%	13	0	0
3	82.5%	33	17.5%	7	0	0
4	72.5%	29	27.5%	11	0	0
5	57.5%	23	37.5%	15	5%	2
6	17.5%	7	52.5%	21	30%	12

Items:-

- 1 Does your work make you work too fast most of the time or not?
- 2 Does it leave you too tired at the end of the day or not?
- 3 Is it too simple to bring out your best abilities or not?
- 4 Can you work on your job and keep your mind on other things most of the time or not?
- 5 Is your job essential to the success of your company or not?
- 6 Does it lead to promotion if you do it well or not?



Proportion of Workers and Feelings on Satisfaction

3. Proportion of workers who find job dull and monotonous all or most of the time

Responses	No	Percentage
Interesting all the time	8	20
Interesting with dull stretches	28	70
Dull but with interesting moments	4	10
Dull and monotonous	0	0
Total:-	40	100

Items:- Which one of the following statements come closest to describing how you feel about your present job?

- My job is interesting all the time.
- While my job is interesting most of the time, there are some dull stretches now and then.
- There are a few times when my job is interesting but most of the time it is pretty dull and monotonous.
- My job is completely dull and monotonous, there is nothing interesting about it.

16	60%
75	7.5%
112	10%

1) As you think you are likely to be laid off temporarily at any time during the next 6 months.



Proportion of workers and feelings on interaction

Items	Yes / True +ve	No / False -ve	Undecided
1	72.5% 29	29.5% 11	
2	15% 6	85% 34	
3	42.5% 17	57.5% 23	
4	72.5% 29	22.5% 9	5% 2

Items:

- 1 I prefer to work on a line where I can have someone to talk to.
- 2 Having someone to sit and talk with is not a problem with me.
- 3 Sometimes, I feel all alone when I am working.
- 4 When I am working alone, the work is more unpleasant and boring.

Proportion of workers expecting a lay-off

Responses	No.	Percentage
Yes	16	40 %
No	21	52.5%
Don't know	75	7.5%
Total	112	100%

- 1) Do you think you are likely to be laid off temporarily at any time during the next 6 months.



Proportion of workers who feel they can have their job as long as they want to.

Responses	No.	Percentage
Can have as long as desired	29	72.5
Job may end before desired	8	20
Don't know	3	7.5

Item: Do you think you can have your job as long as you want it, or do you think there is a good chance that the job won't last as long as you want <sup>it</sup> to.

Factors chosen by workers as most important in advancement in their factory  
Proportion of workers who feel that the job of Chargehand is to be wanted or avoided.

Responses	No.	Percentage
Would like to be	13	32.5
Not like to be	21	53.3
Depends	2	5
Don't know	4	10

Item: Opinions vary on whether the job of Chargehand is a job to be wanted or a job to be avoided. How do you feel about this?

(a) quality of work;

(b) money and willingness to work;

(c) how well he gets on personally with his immediate bosses;



Proportion of workers expecting to advance to Chargehand position

Responses	No.	Percentage
Will become Chargehand	1	7.2
Will not become	9	69.2
Don't know	3	23

Item: (If like to be a Chargehand). Do you think things will work out so that you will be one someday, or are the chances not so good.

Factors chosen by workers as most important in advancement in their factory

Responses	No.	Percentage
Quality of work	15	37.5
Willingness & energy to work	5	12.5
How to get on with the bosses	17	42.5

Item: Just considering your personal impressions, which one or two of the following on this card do you believe gives a person the best chances to get a job in the factory.

- quality of work;
- energy and willingness to work;
- how well he gets on personally with his immediate bosses;



(d) how good a politician he is, whether he is a friend or close relative to a high official or Chargehand;

(e) name of the above.

\* Most respondents picked the first 3 criterias and hence the rest were not tabulated.

Proportion of workers and their feelings about the future

Items	Yes		No		Don't know	
1	47.5%	21	27.5%	11	25%	10
2	42.5%	17	50%	20	7.5%	3
3	50%	20	32.5	13	17.5	7

Items:

- (1) If you would start life all over again, would you choose a different trade or occupation?
- (2) Do you expect to work here for the rest of your life?
- (3) Would you leave your job?